

Lesson: 50th Anniversary of *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka (Kansas)*

Grades Four Through Six

Time

20–40 minutes

Materials

Brown v. Board of Education poster
Writing instruments
Paper

Vocabulary

segregation	Supreme Court	citizen	ruling
equal	court decision	lawyer	prejudice
separate	testify	versus	organization
amendment	integration	judge	NAACP

Note: Consider using graphic organizers to prompt students' thoughts.

Content standards addressed: English–Language Arts Standards, History–Social Science Standards (Teachers may choose which standards they wish to address.)

Grade Four

English–Language Arts Standards

- 1.0 Listening and Speaking Strategies
 - Analysis and Evaluation of Oral Media Communication
 - 1.10 Evaluate the role of the media in focusing attention on events and in forming opinions on issues.
- 2.0 Speaking Applications (Genres and Their Characteristics)
 - 2.2 Make informational presentations:
 - a. Frame a key question.
 - b. Include facts and details that help listeners to focus.

History–Social Science Standards

- 4.4 Students explain how California became an agricultural and industrial power, tracing the transformation of the California economy and its political and cultural development since the 1850s.

- 4.4.8 Describe the history and development of California's public education system, including universities and community colleges.

Grade Five

English–Language Arts Standards

- 1.0 Listening and Speaking Strategies
Comprehension
- 1.1 Ask questions that seek information not already discussed.
 - 1.3 Make inferences or draw conclusions based on an oral report.
- 2.0 Speaking Applications (Genres and Their Characteristics)
- 2.3 Deliver oral responses to literature:
Summarize significant events and details

History–Social Science Standards

- 5.7 Students describe the people and events associated with the development of the U.S. Constitution and analyze the Constitution's significance as the foundation of the American republic.
- 5.7.3 Understand the fundamental principles of American constitutional democracy, including how the government derives its power from the people and the primacy of individual liberty.
 - 5.7.4 Understand how the Constitution is designed to secure our liberty by both empowering and limiting central government and compare the powers granted to citizens, Congress, the president, and the Supreme Court with those reserved to the states.
 - 5.7.5 Discuss the meaning of the American creed that calls on citizens to safeguard the liberty of individual Americans within a unified nation, to respect the rule of law, and to preserve the Constitution.

Grade Six

English–Language Arts Standards

Listening and Speaking

- 2.0 Speaking Applications (Genres and Their Characteristics)
- 2.4 Deliver persuasive presentations:
 - a. Provide a clear statement of the position.
 - b. Include relevant evidence.
 - 2.5 Deliver presentations on problems and solutions
 - a. Theorize on the causes and effects of each problem and establish connections between the defined problem and at least one solution.

Starting the lesson

1. Hang the *Brown v. Board of Education* poster on the wall and have students complete one or all of the following tasks:
 - Discuss what they see and why they think it is important.
 - Write about what they see (quick write).
 - Pair/share.
2. Read or have students read the story of *Brown v. Board of Education*. (See “A Famous Child” noted below.)

Activities

1. Role-play, discuss, or write about the following topics:
 - The courtroom scenario in which this important case was argued
 - Linda Brown’s walk from home to school before the ruling and after the ruling
 - How the students would feel if schools were still segregated
2. For role playing, ask two students to pretend to be parents who still want racial segregation in schools (white students and black students separated). Ask two other students to pretend to be parents who want racial integration in schools (both races attending the same schools). What would these parents say? How might each try to convince the others to change their minds?
3. Have students break into small cooperative groups to read the story, discuss it, and make a presentation to the whole class. Examples of presentation topics:
 - What a typical school was like before the ruling
 - Why an organization such as the NAACP was needed to achieve the ruling

Expected learning outcomes

1. Students will be able to share with others their knowledge of the Supreme Court case *Brown v. Board of Education*.
2. Students will be able to discuss why *Brown v. Board of Education* was an important case.
3. Students will be able to discuss the effects this case has had on public education.

A Famous Child

This is a true story about a young girl in Topeka, Kansas, who did not realize that something special was happening in her life. Yet her name became known by people all across the country. Her name and the facts about her life introduced one of the most important cases ever to be decided by the Supreme Court of the United States.

CHAPTER 1

Linda Brown went to Monroe School, which was a mile away from where she lived. Getting to school was not easy. She had to leave home by 7:40 each morning to walk to a bus stop that was six blocks away. She started off by walking between the train tracks that went through a switching yard. Even though this was dangerous, it was easier than trying to walk outside the tracks because the street was crowded with warehouses and there were no sidewalks. The bus was supposed to arrive by 8 o'clock. Sometimes it arrived on time, and sometimes it was late. When it was late, Linda would have to stand and wait—often in freezing-cold weather or rain or snow. When the bus was on time, she could get right on, but then she would arrive at school a half-hour before it opened. So she would still have to stand outdoors and wait. That bus was the only one she could take to her school. There was no other way for Linda to make the trip without having to stand out in the weather at one place or the other.

When Linda was ready to start third grade, her father, Oliver Brown, surprised her by telling her that he would walk her to school on the first day. Then he surprised her even more by taking a different route. They walked in the opposite direction from the trains for about three blocks, then turned onto a pleasant, tree-lined street with small, neat houses. After walking three more blocks, they came to a school called Sumner Elementary School. It was lighter and prettier than Monroe School. This school had a little tower at one end that was topped by a fancy weather vane. On the other end was a big wall sculpture of a cheerful sun beaming down on children who were running, jumping rope, rolling a hoop, and flying a kite.

Linda wasn't sure why they had come to this school, and she could tell her father was uneasy as he took her by the hand and walked up the front steps. Once inside, they were directed to the principal's office. Linda was told to wait outside the door while her father went in to talk with the principal. He was there for only a few minutes, then he came out and took her by the hand again. As they walked home, Linda could tell that her father was very upset. Even though this school was so much closer to their home than Monroe School, the principal had said Linda would not be allowed to attend Sumner. Sumner School was for white children only. Linda Brown was black.

CHAPTER 2

Linda went back to Monroe School. One night, not long after school had started for the year, her father took her to a meeting that was held at a church that was not the one they usually attended. Many grown-ups were at the meeting, and Linda could not understand what they were talking about. After a while, she was called to the front of the room and asked to stand up on the podium. As she stood on the podium, a voice asked loudly, "Why should this child be forced to travel so far to school each day?"

Linda didn't hear very much about the school situation after that. But many, many people across the country did. An organization called the N-Double-A-C-P, which stood for the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, helped Oliver Brown sue the Topeka Board of Education in a federal district court. The law at that time stated that black children and white children could be sent to separate schools as long as those schools were considered to be equal. The school authorities said the schools were equal. Although Sumner School was a little newer and prettier, Monroe School had a larger playground and fewer cracks in the walls. Both schools had good teachers (all white teachers at Sumner; all black teachers at Monroe). The teachers at both schools had roughly the same class size and were paid the same amount of money. The school authorities pointed out that, yes, most of the black children lived farther away from their schools than the white children lived from theirs, but buses were provided for the black children's transportation. No bus service was provided for any of the white children. The school authorities also said the people were used to things being this way and that not everyone wanted change. They said the children should continue to be segregated, or separated.

The people who testified in court on behalf of Linda, and others like her, said that those facts did not make the schools equal. The very fact that the children were separated made the schools unequal. The people testified that the separation could make the children think they were different from one another instead of teaching them that they could learn from each other. It meant that when they were adults, they would not work as well together or get along in the world because they had not been taught to be together as children. They testified that children should not be separated, that they should go to the school closest to their home.

CHAPTER 3

The court decided that the schools should continue to be segregated. Three judges had listened to the presentations. Although not all of them felt that this was the right thing to do, they felt they had no choice. Supreme Court decisions in other cases had all supported the idea that "separate but equal" was OK, and this case seemed to fit the guidelines for separate-but-equal schools.

The lawyers for the NAACP, Mr. Brown, and people in the other states with similar cases all decided to take this case to the Supreme Court. They said this case was different. The other cases were about transportation or students in college—not elementary school students. They said that the Fourteenth Amendment to the Constitution guaranteed everyone equal protection under the law, and that black elementary school students were not being protected equally. The case was called *Brown v. Board of Education* ("v." stands for "versus," which means "against"), and it was argued before the Supreme Court in 1953. Almost a year later, on May 17, 1954, the justices made a decision.

The decision was one of the most important decisions made in the history of the United States because it said that the previous cases, which may have been decided correctly in their time, were no longer correct in the 1950s. The judges' decision said that separate was not equal and that children of all races should be

allowed to go to school together in their neighborhood schools. Linda Brown never testified in court, but her father did, and so did many other people who had not even met her. Even though they were criticized by people who disagreed, Mr. Brown and the others worked hard for what they believed was right. Today *Brown v. Board of Education* remains one of the most famous cases in American history.

Note: This story is adapted by permission from the magazine *Update on Law-Related Education* (Winter 1990).